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Defence

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When I was a newly-elected MP I surveyed part of my rural electorate to find out what my constituents thought was important. To my complete surprise, the good people of Moore thought that defence was the most important political issue while marketing arrangements for their produce was only the eighth most important issue. I think education for their children came second. That survey was an early step on the long road by which I gradually reached a considerable respect for the collective judgement of my constituents. Among the other things they got right was throwing me out of office in 1983---it was the right time to change government. In short, when people have the necessary information, democracy works middling well.

I wonder how many rural people now know anything of the latest major defence report, the Wrigley Report. This analysis questions Australia's defence force structure in a quite fundamental way, but hardly anybody outside the defence forces seems to care about its existence. For lack of political interest the Government will probably neither accept nor reject its findings. To do either they would have to tell us of too many truths and make real decisions that, in peace time, can too easily be avoided.

Wrigley, an ex-Deputy Secretary of the Department of Defence, does not think much of our defence force structure. He says it is incapable of adequately manning the sophisticated equipment the three services have at their disposal. To overcome this problem he suggests we revitalise and increase the size of the reserves, thereby tapping valuable skills in the civilian community (including those possessed by ex-servicemen and women).

To the same end, and to enable the armed services to make better use of the technical abilities of the community at large, he suggests civilianising many military positions and more contracting out by the armed services. These changes will concentrate the regular forces more on the 'sharp end', he says.

He also called for more planning for the use of the infrastructure that was already available within civilian Australia.

Wrigley expects these changes to enhance the present capability of the defence forces and to enable them to be expanded more rapidly in an emergency. What is more, he expects savings of some $400 million per annum for the taxpayer. Alternatively, the $400 million could be spent on other defence-related matters or employed to expand the professional defence force.

An extremely important side-benefit of the proposed changes is that the armed services will become more integrated with the general community----sharing its values and, I believe, enjoying more community support. As it is, the defence vote is too easily cut. In spite of economic growth, real expenditure on defence has fallen by 5.5% over the past five years. Our soldiers don't make the same fuss that social security beneficiaries, teachers and nurses make, and they do not, therefore, enjoy the same budgetary support. We all hope the armed services are never used, but the price of being unprepared can be high, as we discovered at the beginning of World War II.

On the sharp end, defence is one of the few government activities that cannot safely be privatised---we don't want private armies. But it seems we can gain much by privatising some of the support needed by the men in the field. That is, of course, only if the relevant union does not strike in their hour of need.

Wrigley's changes would mark a return toward greater reliance upon the 'citizen soldier', but, in this case, a militia strengthened by a hard core of professionals more of whom are trained in fighting skills. Citizen soldiers have a fine record and in big conflicts we have relied ultimately upon them---so why not? The new structure would make Australia's army, navy and airforce more like those of most other modern Western Nations including the United States.

The most important objection, as I interpret the debate, is a difference of opinion about the availability of civilian support when it is needed. Can it be mobilised quickly enough and, if unionised, will it cooperate?

If defence is still a big concern in rural electorates, then Federal politicians might be seen rushing around country towns explaining the Wrigley Report. Somehow, I don't expect that. The wider community does not have opinions on the sort of issues Wrigley raises, and nobody is informing it. That fact alone might be sufficient reason to adopt Wrigley's recommendation to involve the community, but I doubt that that will happen either. Until there is an overt military threat, we will just muddle on.

John Hyde is Executive Director of the Australian Institute for Public Policy **ENDS**